

## CRAPE MYRTLE

*Lagerstroemia indica* L.

Plant Symbol = LAIN

Contributed by: USDA NRCS National Plant Data Center



J.S. Peterson @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database

### Uses

**Commercial use:** Crape myrtle is valued as a landscape plant for its prolific summer flowers, heat and drought tolerance, and year-round landscape interest.

Crape myrtle is used for buffer strips around parking lots, for median strip plantings along highways, near decks, patios, as shade trees in small parking lots and around homes.

### Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status (e.g. threatened or endangered species, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

### Description

**General:** Crape myrtle is a medium to large shrub or a small multi-stemmed tree that can grow up to 40 feet. Flowering begins as early as May in some cultivars and continues into the fall. Each 6- to 18-inch cluster of flowers (or panicle) develops on the tips of new growth and is composed of hundreds of 1-to 2-inch flowers. Color ranges include shades of purple, lavender, white, pink and red, including "true" red, a relatively recent development. Some cultivars have bicolor flowers (two colors on each petal), some cultivars have flower colors that fade with age or certain environmental conditions, and other cultivars have panicles composed of a mix of

flower colors. Strips of bark peel off in early summer to reveal mottled new bark ranging in color from pale cream to dark cinnamon to rich brown to bright orange. The bark color gradually fades over winter until it peels again the next summer.

Leaves on many of the *Lagerstroemia indica* cultivars are rounded, opposite or some leaves alternate or whorled, simple, elliptical, entire margin, 1 1/2 to 3 inches long, dark green above and paler below. Most hybrid cultivars have lance-shaped leaves up to 5 inches long and 3 inches wide while other species have even larger leaves. Leaves are often tinged red in the spring and turn dark green by summer. Several cultivars are known for new growth that is bronze, red or burgundy and some cultivars are claimed to have burgundy-colored foliage all summer.

When the leaves fall in winter, crape myrtle becomes a living sculpture. The trunk and branches of tree-form plants have an attractively gnarled, sinuous character with smooth bark.

**Distribution:** For current distribution, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site.

**Habitat:** Crape myrtle is adapted to climatic conditions throughout the south and southeast. Well-established plants are extremely drought tolerant and have low fertility requirements, although they respond to fertilizer and water with lush growth. Crape myrtle has low salt tolerance, so it should not be irrigated with saline water or used near the coast unless it is well-protected from saline conditions.

### Adaptation

The crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia* species) is native to China and Korea but has been so embraced by Southerners and has become a dominant landscape plant throughout the South. Breeding programs have produced superior forms with a wide range of plant sizes and habits, improved flowering, new flower colors, ornamental bark, ornamental foliage, pest resistance and increased vigor.

### Establishment

Softwood, semi-hardwood, hardwood, or root cuttings can propagate crape myrtle. Softwood and semi-hardwood cuttings root easily when taken in spring or summer. Hardwood cuttings from dormant

plants also root easily, although use of rooting hormone improves rooting percentages. Root cuttings may be dug in early spring and planted in the greenhouse. Plantings established with root cuttings are normally poor because of root inconsistency.

Seed capsules ripening in the fall may be collected, dried, and stored in sealed containers. No seed pre-treatment is necessary and seeds will germinate within 3 weeks after sowing. Best growth results when seeds are sown during the early days of spring. Seed should be sown in well-drained slightly acidic to neutral moist soil and covered to a depth of one quarter on an inch.

When using container or root ball planting, choose sunny sites with well-drained soil, making sure there is enough room for shrub to reach its mature spread. Dig a hole twice as wide as container or root ball. Set plant at same depth or slightly higher than it was in the pot, or if balled, even with top of root ball. Fill in hole around plant with soil, mound soil to form a 2-inch-high ridge around perimeter of the hole to act as a catch basin. If plant is balled in synthetic fabric, remove fabric carefully before planting. Burlap may be left around root ball and then peeled back once plant is set in hole. Water thoroughly, filling the basin and allowing water to settle several times. Spread 2-inch layer of mulch around plant

### **Pests and Potential Problems**

Crape myrtles are trouble-free small trees with the most common problems being powdery mildew, Cercospora leaf spot, aphids, Japanese beetles and sooty mold. The fungus *Erysiphe lagerstroemia* causes powdery mildew. Patches of white to grayish powdery growth occur on the surfaces of leaves, flowers and new shoots. Heavily infected flowers may fail to open. Infected parts of the plant are usually distorted and stunted. The disease is most serious in shady, damp locations, especially where plants are crowded and air circulation is poor. Development of the fungus is caused by high humidity at night and dry, mild daytime conditions, and often occurs during the spring and fall.

Very few insects are pests of crape myrtle however, *Tinocallis kahawaluokalani*, the crape myrtle aphid is one of the most important insect pest of the crape myrtle. This aphid feeds on the leaves and young twigs of crape myrtle. The crape myrtle aphid feeds only on crape myrtle trees. Japanese beetle (*Popillia japonica*) is also a pest, feeding on leaves and flowers. In addition to crape myrtle, it will feed on nearly three hundred different plant species.

Crape myrtle aphids are pale yellowish green in color with black spots on the abdomen. They vary in length from  $\frac{1}{16}$  to  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch long. They survive the winter as eggs, and the eggs hatch in the spring. During the growing season, females give birth to live young. Since it takes about 10 days to reach maturity, several generations are produced each growing season. Aphids feed by inserting their mouthparts into tender new leaves from which they suck plant sap. Plant sap has a high sugar content. When they feed, the aphids excrete large amounts of a sugary liquid called honeydew. With a large aphid population, the honeydew can completely coat leaves. The honeydew serves as food for the sooty mold fungi, as well as various insects, including ants, wasps and flies. As the aphid feeds, it injects saliva into the leaf. The saliva causes yellow spots to develop on the leaf. Several other predators feed on the crape myrtle aphid. These include ladybird beetles (ladybugs) and their larvae (immature forms), green lacewings and their larvae, hover fly maggots, parasitic wasps and entomophagous (insect feeding) fungi.

Leaf and stem surfaces are covered with a black sooty substance, causing them to appear black and dirty or sooty mold. It indicates that there is an insect problem on the plant. These common molds are caused by fungi that grow on the sugary substance, called honeydew, produced by various insects that suck sap from the plant. Aphids, scales, mealy bugs and whiteflies most commonly cause this problem.

Adult Japanese beetles are about  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch in length and coppery-brown in color with metallic green heads. They emerge from the soil and feed from May to August. They lay their eggs in the soil. Grubs hatch from the eggs and feed on grass roots. As the weather cools, the grubs move more deeply into the soil, and over winter. Both adult beetles and their larvae (grubs) can seriously damage plants as a result of their feeding. Adult Japanese beetles eat flowers and skeletonize leaves (eat leaf tissue between the veins, resulting in a lacy skeleton remaining). The grubs feed on the roots of plants, especially on the roots of grasses.

### **Cultivars, Improved, and Selected Materials (and area of origin)**

*Lagerstroemia* species are deciduous shrubs or trees with geographic origins in China, Japan, and other parts of Southeast Asia.

Private individuals, nurseries and public institutions, have developed many cultivars of crape myrtle. In 1962, the U.S. National Arboretum in Washington D.C. began a crape myrtle breeding project with

*Lagerstroemia indica*. Major advances occurred when *L. subcostata* and *L. fauriei* were introduced into the breeding program in 1966. The resulting hybrids were highly ornamental and resistant to powdery mildew. As a result of the late Dr. Donald Egolf's efforts, the U.S. National Arboretum has released over 24 selected for cold hardiness, for resistance to powdery mildew, and for varying heights, habits, flower colors, fall foliage colors, and bark characteristics. All U.S. National Arboretum cultivars have Native American names.

Contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (formerly Soil Conservation Service) office for more information. Look in the phone book under "United States Government." The Natural Resources Conservation Service will be listed under the subheading "Department of Agriculture."

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